DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 457 HE 010 294

AUTHOR Gounard, Beverley Roberts
TITLE Organizing a Course in the Psychology of Aging.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented as part of a symposium on "The Role of the Psychologist in Gerontology" at the meeting of the New York State Psychological Association (New York, New York, May 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age; Changing Attitudes; *Course Content; Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; *Gerontology; Guidelines; Higher Education; Human Development; *Instructional Design; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Older Adults; Textbooks; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS State University of New York

ABSTRACT

Suggestions for organizing a course in the psychology of aging are offered in this paper, based on such a course at the State University of New York College at Buffalo. Focus is on the lower-level undergraduate course that has Introductory Psychology as the sole prerequisite. Goals include: (1) to familiarize students with current research and theoretical considerations; (2) to develop the critical thinking abilities of students; (3) to develop students' appreciation of aging as part of the life process and especially as an integral part of their own future lives; (4) to provide students with the information needed to make career decisions; and (4) to consider the needs and problems of the aged in a manner that is not consistent with society's negative stereotypes of the aged and to foster positive attitudes toward aging and the aged. The course must include biological, sociological, economic, political, and anthropological aspects of aging, as well as research methodology, adult IQ, learning, memory, perceptual processes, motivation, attitudes, myths of aging, personality functioning, environmental factors, and physical and biological aspects of aging. Specific resource materials and learning experiences (such as interviews, simulation exercises, or guest lectures) are recommended. (LBH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED157457

Organizing a Course in the Psychology of Aging

Beverley Roberts Gounard
Department of Psychology
State University College
1300 Elmwood Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14222

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Beverly Roberts Gounard
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Paper presented as part of a symposium on The role of the psychologist in gerontology (I. R. Stuart, Chair) at the meeting of the New York State Psychological Association, New York, May 1978.

HE 010294

Organizing a Course in the Psychology of Aging

The number of courses and programs in the psychology of aging is expanding rapidly in North American universities and colleges (see Sprouse, 1976). In responding to the student demand for such courses, faculty members who have had a minimal amount of formal training in this area are being asked to develop and teach courses on aging. I have received numerous requests for assistance from such individuals, and I have prepared this paper to provide some guidance to them in organizing a course in the psychology of aging.

I teach in the Department of Psychology at the State University of New York College at Buffalo where we not only have courses in psychology of aging, but also a specialized bachelor's degree program in psychology of aging. This program is quite new and has a limited number of students in it at the present time, but we have been very pleased with student interest in the program and with the success of our graduates. A report on this program was prepared by my colleagues, Drs. Irene M. Hulicka and John B. Morganti, and was published in Educational Gerontology (Hulicka & Morganti, 1976).

When discussing the organization of a course in psychology of aging, there are several general considerations to be addressed first. Courses may be offered at a variety of levels--lower- or upper-level undergraduate, or graduate. There may be no, few, or many prerequisites for any given course. I am personally most familiar with a lower-level undergraduate

course that has Introductory Psychology as the sole prerequisite. Student interest is greatest in a course at this level, and the following comments are most applicable to such a course.

Establishing the goals is the first step in organizing any course. My goals in a lower-level undergraduate course in the psychology of aging are:

1. To familiarize students with the current research findings and theoretical considerations relevant to behavior in the aged.

2. To develop the critical thinking abilities of students in evaluating current research and theories in aging.

3. To develop the students' appreciation of aging as part of the life process, and especially as an integral aspect of their own future lives.

4. To provide students with the information they need to make career decisions involving direct work with the aged, or to include consideration of the aged within their present career goals.

5. To consider the needs and problems of the aged in a manner that is <u>not</u> consistent with our society's negative stereotypes of the aged--and thus to foster positive attitudes toward aging and the aged.

The interests and goals of the students who enroll in a course on aging must not be ignored as the instructor sets his or her goals for the course. I have found that students who enroll in psychology of aging courses are usually a very special group with a very personal committment to the study of aging. Their academic majors and career interests are usually very

diverse, but they almost all share first-hand experience with problems associated with aging. For example, they have grandparents in nursing homes; they have had personal experience with terminal illness in their families; they have done volunteer work with the aged; they have formed friendships with elderly relatives, neighbors, or quite often landlords and landladies (who function as substitute grandparents for lonely students who are away from home). One noteworthy student of mine works in a funeral home and wants to be a funeral director--he is especially concerned with helping the bereaved elderly. Many students are seeking career guidance and the instructor plays an important role in determining whether the students will subsequently choose to work with the aged or not. There are great rewards for the instructor inherent in this situation. I find it very gratifying when students tell me that their career plans have been finalized on the basis of their experiences in my course.

Proceeding now to more specific considerations regarding a course in the psychology of aging, the topical coverage must be outlined. Psychology of aging is perhaps the most interdisciplinary course that one will find in a psychology department. It is impossible to teach psychology of aging without also considering biological, sociological, economic, political, and anthropological aspects of aging. Basically, I cover research methodology, age-related differences in adults' IQ, learning, memory, perceptual processes, and motivation, attitudes toward aging and the aged, myths of aging, personality functioning and patterns of adjustment in the aged, environmental factors and aging, physical and biological aspects of aging, and

special topics like retirement and death and dying.

The resource materials that are available in the area of psychology of aging vary a great deal in number and quality. For the instructor, there are two very good "How to do it" type manuals. One is An Instructor's Handbook for the Development of a Basic Course in Gerontology (Slover et al., 1975) published by the Syracuse University All-University Gerontology Center, and the other is Teaching Undergraduate Courses in Adult Development and Aging (Hulicka & Whitbourne, 1978). Instructors also need to be aware of the Handbook of the Psychology of Aging (Birren & Schaie, 1977). The handbook is an invaluable source of information for lecture notes.

Regarding the choice of a text for a course in psychology of aging, there are problems. I have yet to find a satisfactory text for my course. At this college, we are using Basic Processes in Adult Developmental Psychology (Elias, Elias, & Elias, 1977). It is an excellent book that encompasses both human and animal development, but it is really too advanced for the level of the course. A text that covers the same basic material at a more elementary level is needed. There are less difficult texts available (e.g., Late Adulthood: Perspectives in Human Development by Kalish, 1975, and Adult Development and Aging: An interdisciplinary developmental view by Kimmel, 1974), but they tend to be too restricted in their topical coverage or too interdisciplinary in nature. I find that the supplementary-type texts that are available for courses such as the one I teach are much more interesting than the basic textbooks. For example, Hulicka (1977) has published a collection of research abstracts en-

titled Empirical Studies in the Psychology and Sociology of Aging that was specifically prepared to be suitable for undergraduate students who have a minimal amount of sophistication in psychology. In addition, there are two readers available that contain articles selected from the popular press as well as some articles from scientific sources. These are Focus: Aging (Cox, 1978) and Readings in Aging and Death: Contemporary Perspectives (Zarit, 1977).

When actually planning the learning experiences that will take place in a course on psychology of aging, many exciting options are available to the instructor. Some examples of activities I have used in addition to lectures at various times are the following:

1. Simulation exercises on handicapping conditions of the aged (e.g., blindness, paralysis, etc.) and the use of prosthetic devices to overcome these conditions.

2. Structured interviews with the aged conducted by students on a one-to-one basis.

3. Field trips to nursing homes with the students hosting a party complete with entertainment and refreshments.

4. Guest lectures given by representatives of the local government offices for the aging, specialists in preretirement planning, and individuals who are terminally ill.

5. Research projects conducted by the students on various topics.

6. Films--lists are available from the Pennsylvania State University Psychological Cinema Register and from the University of Southern Califor-

nia Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center.

7. Local conferences on aging attended by the students. These conferences are sponsored by various health services agencies in this community.

8. Projective testing (e.g., Draw-a-Man, Gerontological Apperception Test) taken by the students who must respond as if they are aged 75 years. The results are then examined for information regarding attitudes toward aging and myths of aging.

In conclusion, I have tried to present information that would be useful to anyone who is given the task of organizing a course in aging, and who doesn't know quite where to begin. The study of aging is fascinating for both instructors and students. We will undoubtedly see considerable expansion of curricular offerings in this area during the next few years.

References

Birren, J. E., Schaie, K. W. (Eds.). Handbook of the psychology of aging. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977.

Cox, H. (Ed.). Focus: Aging (An annual editions reader). Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 1978.

Hulicka, I. M. (Ed.). Empirical studies in the psychology and sociology of aging. New York: Crowell, 1977.

Hulicka, I. M., & Morganti, J. B. An undergraduate concentration in the psychology of aging: Approach, program, and evaluation. Educational Gerontology, 1976, 1, 107-118.

Hulicka, I. M., & Whitbourne, S. K. Teaching undergraduate courses in adult development and aging. Manual for preconvention workshop held at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, August 1978. (Available at a cost of $3.50 from I. M. Hulicka, Ph.D., Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Social Sciences, State University College, 1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14222.)

Kalish, R. A. Late adulthood: Perspectives on human development. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1975.

Kimmel, D. C. Adulthood and aging: An interdisciplinary view. New York: Wiley, 1974.

Slover, D. L. et al. (Eds.). An instructor's handbook for the development of a basic course in gerontology. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University All-University Gerontology Center, 1975.

Sprouse, B. M. (Ed.). National directory of educational programs in geron-

tology. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

Zarit, S. H. (Ed.). Readings in aging and death: Contemporary perspectives. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.